

Volunteer Voices

February 1, 2009
Volume 3, Number 1

Serving a network of over 1500 volunteers in South Carolina!

SOUTH CAROLINA
Volunteer
Guardian ad Litem Program

SAVE THE DATE:

PREVENT CHILD ABUSE RALLY

THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 2009 AT THE STATE HOUSE

ALL VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF INVITED!

Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina will be holding their annual Rally to kick off National Child Abuse Prevention Month. The day will start with a Legislative Breakfast, free to all volunteers and Legislators in the Blatt Building at the Statehouse. This will be followed at 11am by a Rally on the State house steps. Volunteers will be welcome to hold the Forgotten Children cutouts as a symbol of their commitment to abused and neglected children.

After the rally, volunteers and staff from the South Carolina GAL Program will be joined by our very special guest, Michael Piraino, the CEO of National CASA since 1994. Lunch will be at Trinity Episcopal Church, across the street from the state house grounds. Food will be available at a nominal cost, or you may bring a brown bag lunch.

In the afternoon, GAL volunteers may visit Legislators from their districts to educate them on child welfare issues. We will be providing information packets about the program for you to discuss with your legislators. In this time of difficult budget decisions, this is a great opportunity to remind your legislators of the tremendous service volunteers provide to the abused and neglected children in this state. In 2008, GALs volunteered over 83,000 hours statewide to the program.



GAL Volunteers with cutouts at the Forgotten Children Rally, Columbia State House steps, November 8, 2008. More about the Columbia Rally on page 4, or go to www.columbia.scgal.org



ForgottenChildren
FOSTER CHILDREN TAKE A STAND!



HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

It seemed harmless at first, but the argument became a shouting match which escalated to a struggle over the cell phone. It ended suddenly when a blow was struck, and the police were called. Before the evening was over Sally was in an emergency shelter, and mom was in jail. The case was assigned to me.

At my first meeting with Sally, anxiety, guilt and confusion were in play for her. This was a new, unexpected, and frightening time for the teenager. Her familiar and routine world was now topsy-turvy. By the time of the Merits Hearing, I had spoken to the school guidance counselor and one of Sally's teachers. Sally's record of attendance and grades were certainly in need of improvement, but there was no record of aggression or acting out kind of behavioral issues. My report to the court stated that Sally's wishes were to be returned to her home and her mom. Frankly, I was less prepared for the Merit's than were the more thorough staff from DSS. The judge approved the DSS recommendation that Sally remain in DSS custody and noted that the bond for mom contained a provision that prohibited contact between mother and daughter. It was added that the case should be reviewed at an early date to give time to see if the contact provision could be removed.

The holidays were looming and the prospects of Sally's returning home were bleak. From the beginning, she had expressed her desire to return home. Her 17th birthday had come and gone, and Thanksgiving was approaching. I decided it would take a more aggressive approach if Sally were to make it home by Christmas.

The first stop was at the Solicitor's Office to request that the no-contact provision in mom's bond be removed. The solicitor reviewed the case and agreed. A court order removed the restriction. Next was a visit to the police station to secure incident reports relating to mom, Sally and the police. There were several, but they included references to a barking dog and others of a similar nature that were trivial. Oh, yes, two or three of the incidents were based on more serious charges, but they were several years old. Nothing to confirm a pattern of conflict between Sally and her mom. A visit to the family physician was next. This produced a letter from the physician presenting his assessment of the family. Then followed a visit to a local counselor who had worked with mom. The information gathered was bundled into an affidavit that was forwarded to DSS with a request to get the case on the docket as soon as possible.

The day before the court date an agreement was reached which included a recommendation that Sally be returned to mom's custody and that DSS would provide support services for the next six months. The actual time spent in court was brief. The system had worked. Both DSS and myself have done the work expected of us. Agreement was reached and confirmed by the Family Court.

And most importantly, Sally made it home for Christmas.

Lessons Learned:

1. Relating to a 16-17 year old teenager is very different from the relationship and action required for younger children. The law provides for and protects the rights of an older child to be present and testify in court.
2. The GAL can initiate action to have a case presented to the Court for review.
3. It is important to listen to, respect and work with DSS, but the GAL must also provide independent research, data collection, and verification of relevant facts.
4. The GAL is not alone. Involve and consult with GAL attorney and GAL support staff.
5. Working "in the best interest of the child," is an action statement. To do so provides energy and focus.

Robert, Volunteer GAL

“When you encourage a bright thirteen year old, abandoned by both parents, to do well in school, and you see his grades go from F to honor roll, you know your effort as his GAL has not been wasted.”



When a five year old boy, neglected by his mother, greets you with a wide grin and a shout of “Hey, Mr. Marvin!”, you know why you became a Guardian ad Litem. When a teenager, rescued from a crack cocaine household, says a sincere “Thank you” for arranging his involvement in a week of summer basketball camp, you know the GAL program is worthwhile. Abused, neglected and abandoned children need an advocate in the Family Court system, and they need a caring adult friend in their lives. That is the role of the volunteer GAL.

I became a GAL because a friend convinced me that the program offered a chance to have a positive influence on children in need. As I quickly learned, the GAL is often the most constant presence in a child’s life. They move from placement to placement, shift from one case worker to

another, and sometimes transfer from school to school. All the while, their relationship with their GAL remains the same. I make two pledges to my guardian children: I will always tell them the truth, and I will always be available when they need me.

Initially, I was slightly apprehensive about dealing with lawyers and judges and social workers, but I soon realized that their intentions, like mine, were to serve the best interests of the children. The training sessions provided a basic introduction to the Guardian ad Litem program and the continuing advice from the GAL staff has been invaluable in resolving bureaucratic questions and legal issues surrounding some of my cases.

The children I serve as an advocate look forward to our regular visits. They listen to, and sometimes follow, my advice. When they share their hopes and fears, I try to encourage their dreams and help resolve the things that worry them. I have developed the practice of writing to my kids between visits to remind them that I think about them often.

The activities involved in being a Guardian ad Litem, I have found, require a commitment of time, an investment of emotional energy, and a considerable degree of patience. Yet for all it demands, the reward is immeasurable when one of your children makes it to a loving and forever home.

Marvin Cann, Spartanburg Volunteer Guardian ad Litem

COLUMBIA FORGOTTEN CHILDREN RALLY NOVEMBER 8, 2008



Thank you to all our volunteers from across the state who gathered on the Capitol building steps to show support for abused and neglected children. More pictures from the rallies are available online at: www.columbia.scgal.org



GREENVILLE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN RALLY NOVEMBER 10, 2008



Volunteers attending the Greenville Rally in Cleveland Park enjoyed a beautiful and inspiring day. Special guests included Senator Mike Fair, Family Court Judge Alvin Johnson, and DSS Adoptions Program Coordinator Judy Caldwell. More pictures from the rallies are available on online at: www.greenville.scgal.org



SPARTANBURG FORGOTTEN CHILDREN RALLY NOVEMBER 12, 2008



Spartanburg volunteers braved chilly winds to hear special guest speakers Attorney General Henry McMaster, and Family Court Judge Georgia Anderson. More pictures from the rallies are available on online at: www.spartanburg.scgal.org



FLORENCE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN RALLY NOVEMBER 13, 2008



Florence area volunteers heard Caren Coon, Volunteer GAL and daughter Rachel Coon, singing "Beautiful One" by Jeremy Camp. Other guest speakers included Mr. Allie Brooks, Retired Principal; James (Jim) G. McGee, III, GAL Attorney; Sandra Kinley-Belin, Director Region IV Adoption & Nadine Livingston, Florence DSS Director. More pictures from the rallies are available on online at: www.florence.scgall.org



CHARLESTON FORGOTTEN CHILDREN RALLY NOVEMBER 14, 2008



Charleston GAL volunteers gathered in beautiful Hampton Park for their Forgotten Children Rally. Special guest speakers included WCSC Anchor Debi Chard, Charleston Mayor Pro Tem Kathleen Wilson, Rhonda Ellington Center, DSS Adoptions and Orestes Verge, President of the Foster Parent Association. More pictures from the rallies are available online at: www.charleston.scgal.org



YORK VOLUNTEER FRANK LIVAK CELEBRATES 90!

Frank Livak of Fort Mill, celebrated his 90th birthday on Sunday, October 5, 2008, with staff and volunteers from the York County GAL Program. Frank is the oldest of more than 1500 volunteers in South Carolina, and has no plans to slow down. Frank took the volunteer training class three years ago, after retiring as a teacher. "I thought I should be doing something," Livak said. "I figured I could still make a difference." Frank keeps busy, handling up to 4 cases at a time, while still teaching reading and General Equivalency Diploma preparation. Mary Hoppman, Circuit Coordinator from York and Union counties, says "He told us you can either wear out or rust out, and he prefers to wear out. Frank is the oldest guardian in the state, but he does the same things all guardians do. His age is no obstacle."



Frank has been a high school teacher and principal, college professor and education statistician in three states. He has always been concerned with the value of school for all kids, especially those who needed a

hand. It is that hand he still gives the guardian program.

The family court is no playground. It is a serious, contentious place with the futures of kids on the line. That's why Livak, with so many decades in education, hopes to keep his hand in the fray.

"The child who needs the most love is the hardest to love," Livak said. "The child who needs the most help is the hardest to teach. That doesn't mean we don't try."

Based on an article in The Herald, October 8, 2008 by Andrew Dys.



GOD BLESS YOUR CHILDREN

BY: LISA CRAWFORD, JASON MCKOY, GRANT PRITCHARD AND ANNE MARIE MCKOY

God bless your children, as their lives grow
Help them be cared for, by those who love them so.
Please protect our children, from this cruel world.
Thank you for those who will put your children first.

In these days and times there are ones with little minds
Children that need someone special in their life
To take them by the hand, and lead them on their way
To a better life, a safe permanent place.

Would you be that someone, who will put a child first?
Give your sacred time, to save them from a curse
A tender life that was taken, and used so violently.
Their lives depend on our generosity.

God Bless our children, guide them on their way.
We've got to do much better, and serve our kids today.
Your special people, who are nothing without you
Help us to do, what you expect us to.



A special delight at the Columbia Forgotten Children Rally was a song written especially for the occasion by volunteer and GAL staff member Lisa Crawford, along with Jason McKoy, Grant Pritchard and Anne Marie McKoy and performed by their band Channel 146.

The band is family oriented, and Lisa states they wrote the song because "We all have a love and deep concern for our children and children that have no family to look after their best interest."

Channel 146 Band Members, from left to right: Lisa Crawford, Jason McKoy, Anne Marie McKoy, and Grant Pritchard. Picture courtesy Jim Covington.



ADOPTIVE FAMILY FILLS ARMS WITH LOVE

Cynthia O'Rear is now a volunteer Guardian ad Litem. Before becoming a volunteer, her family adopted a child from the foster care system. She knew firsthand the need for adoptive families in South Carolina. During her years working at a group home for children, the children would beg to go home with her on the weekends. "I know how empty those little arms were and how very desperately they wanted an adult to love them" she says. Cynthia shared her story at the Columbia Forgotten Children Rally.

"We thought the biggest obstacles to adoption would be our age. I was 40 and my husband was 54. But we received a lot of help throughout the process. The foster parents of our adopted son were amazing. They allowed us to visit and get to know him before we ever were placed together. Our adoptions worker was incredible as a resource person and as a support person.

My favorite moment as an adoptive parent was when our son's foster mother brought him to my classroom for my students to meet. The students had experienced all my worries, fears, and excitement with me, and they wanted

to meet him. He was celebrating his first birthday and it was near Christmas. What a wonderful surprise for me. I didn't know they were coming, but the whole class rejoiced with me. My extended family is very small, but they threw us a party, and I got the cutest pair of shoes for him. I put them on his feet right away. It was our first pair of shoes together!! Isn't that silly?

Our adopted son is a kind, quiet, and thoughtful child. He is called the "gentle giant" at his former school. He is a good boy, but he has learned that he has to work hard and keep academics first. We have to read every day. He has to work hard to keep from falling behind. He is a joyous child, and his giggles and sweetness affect us to the core. He still holds my hand and his dad's hand in church or if we are just sitting out on the lawn chairs, talking. He loves for me to scratch his back and just to sit on the bed together and talk. He loves costumes and he has a king's costume out of velour, complete with lion insignia, Indiana Jones's costume, Darth Vader costume, and loves to just jump on the trampoline and slay "bad" guys. He has a great imagination and wonderful art.

I can't believe how easy it was for us to adopt. I simply can't. Before we started this process, our arms were so empty, that they ached. Even our biological child's arms wanted a little brother. We attended classes for pre-adoptive parents and we were allowed to be matched. We knew our adoptive son's entire background before ever adopting him. We fostered him from May until August, until the adoption.

If you are considering adoption, I would say this: Having some perseverance, a good case worker from adoptions, and empty arms are great motivators. And if your arms are empty, how do you think the arms of children who are in foster care, waiting to be adopted, feel? I am a better person because of this experience. My husband would agree. We look at life totally differently, not as a given, but as a sweet gift. That is what we consider both our sons."

Cynthia O'Rear, Volunteer GAL

ORGANIZING PAYS OFF!

I am the Guardian ad Litem for six children. And I would do anything for them, including the tedious reports and record keeping required for our grants, the Court, and our supervisor's files. But I'm always looking for better ways of staying on top of the paperwork, so I can spend more time with "my" kids.

For each child I have put together a three-ring notebook. This keeps all my papers organized and accessible. My appointment letter as Guardian comes first. Then I have divided sections for the following papers: child information (including birth info, placements, school records, medications, etc), court documents, my court reports, monthly monitor reports, FCRB, treatment plans, psych evaluations, and miscellaneous. As the paperwork comes in, I use a three-hole punch and then "file" it away in the appropriate section of the notebook, placing the most recent up front. This system keeps all my papers neat and makes it easier to find information when I need it.

As for my monthly monitor reports and time sheets:

The very first page of the notebook (ahead of the Guardian appointment letter) is my written record of all the month's events. On my computer, I have a separate folder for each case. Within each folder, I have a page that contains the month and year, the child's name and birth date, and all my current contact information. Each month, I simply update the contact information and type in the new month. I print this out, placing it in the notebook so I can record the month's events as they occur. Each entry includes the date, time spent, the contact, and a brief summary of the interaction. At the end of the month, in about a half an hour, I can enter all this information onto a form in the computer, tally my hours, and be prepared for the new month.

Then I'm high-fiving my computer... and off I go to play with "my" kids!

Susan Ramsey, Lexington County Volunteer

Editor's Note: email me at cwalker@oepp.sc.gov for samples of Susan's computer forms.

YOUTH INTERN OPPORTUNITY

A recent CASA update featured an opportunity for foster children through the FosterClub All Stars. If you know of a current or former foster youth between the ages of 18-24, encourage them to check out this summer internship! It is an exciting leadership opportunity!

If selected as a FosterClub All-Star, the young person will:

- Help other youth in foster care.
- Travel and experience different parts of the country.
- Receive approx. \$3600 over the summer.
- Develop fantastic leadership, advocacy and presentation skills.

Interested young people should go to www.fosterclub.org to learn more and get an application.

We hope you enjoy this month's stories. This issue includes contributions from York, Laurens, Spartanburg, Lexington, and Pickens counties. Thanks to all those who chose to share with us this month. In order to help protect the confidentiality of the children we serve, when your stories directly involve children, we will not print the last names of the volunteers. In addition, the details identifying the children have been changed. This newsletter funded by a grant from National CASA. www.nationalcasa.org

*Send us your story! We are looking for all types of stories about your experiences: a problem you overcame, something special you advocated for a child, or something you'd like to tell people who are thinking about becoming volunteers. You can submit your stories in writing or by email. And, if you want to share but don't like to write, please call me at (864) 878-6280 and I'll interview you on the phone. Please submit your stories to: Cherie Walker, Box 414, Pickens, SC 29671
email to: cwalker@oepp.sc.gov*